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THE PENIN

The Comfort Women Agreement 5 Years On

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The agreement between Korea and Japan on the issue of comfort women, announced in 2015, seemed like an amazing breakthrough on a sensitive topic in the bilateral relationship. But in the five years since then, the agreement has largely fallen apart, and other disagreements over the legacy of Japanese control of the Korean Peninsula have raised significant tensions between Seoul and Tokyo. It remains to be seen if regional leaders will be able to reach another compromise to address this painful issue.

The comfort women agreement was announced after a meeting in Seoul between Korean and Japanese officials in December 2015. One of the terms of the agreement was the establishment of a foundation to support the surviving Korean comfort women with ¥1 billion in funds donated by the Japanese government. Most notably, both Foreign Ministers Yun Byung-se and Kishida Fumio said that the issue of the comfort women was “finally and irreversibly” resolved with the faithful implementation of the agreed terms.

The agreement reached by the conservative Park Geun-hye was strongly criticized in Korea after it was announced. In a small poll done days after the announcement of the deal, Realmeter found that 50.7% of respondents disapproved of the deal. The comfort women survivors themselves criticized the deal for prioritizing money instead of another more sincere apology from Japan. The *New York Times* quoted Lee Yong-soo, a survivor, saying: “We are not craving for money. What we demand is that Japan make official reparations for the crime it had committed.”

The Park administration tried to defend the agreement in the face of its domestic critics. Yonhap reported comments by Blue House spokesman Jeong Yeon-guk who said that the administration was focused on “the firm principle that victims’ honor should be restored, and their wounds should be healed.” The agency also quoted another unnamed official who added that there “were limitations for the government to have close consultation with victims while negotiating with Japan.”

But these explanations were not sufficient to address concerns by opponents of the deal. In a meeting with First Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam in December 2015, Ms. Lee was quoted by Yonhap as saying: “Which country do you belong to? Shouldn’t you tell us that you’re having such negotiations with Japan?” In a separate meeting with Second Vice Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, comfort women survivor Kim Kun-ja said: “We’re the victims. Why should the government rashly reach a deal? We won’t accept it.”

Another strong opponent of the comfort women agreement was Moon Jae-in, then running as a candidate to succeed Park Geun-hye. “The issue of ‘comfort women,’ both the agreement and the negotiation process were wrong,” he said in an interview with *The Korea Herald*. “It must be renegotiated, as is the will of the majority of the public.”

After taking power in 2017, the Moon administration created a task force in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to review the agreement. In a report of their finding released in December 2017, the task force criticized the previous administration for not doing more outreach to the surviving comfort women, and making too many concessions to the Japanese side.

“The agreement was finalized mostly based on government views without adequately taking into account the opinions of victims in the process of negotiation,” said the report, according to a story published by Yonhap.

A major portion of the agreement, the Reconciliation and Healing Foundation, was eventually dissolved by the Moon administration. “We, along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have consulted with the relevant offices on how to handle the foundation and collected various opinions,” said the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in a statement released in November 2018. “Based on the current situations of the foundation and the review results, we have decided to close it down.”

Predictably, the Japanese government strongly criticized the move. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō warned that “if an international promise is not kept, state-to-state relations are not forged.” Foreign Minister Kōno Tarō was also quoted by Yonhap as saying: “The announcement is problematic in relation to the Japan-South Korea agreement and it’s totally unacceptable.” Since the dissolution of the foundation, there have been no significant attempts to salvage it or the wider agreement.

As the wider Korea-Japan relationship has suffered in recent years, a rehabilitation of ties has not yet occurred with the inauguration of a new leader in the Kantei. As noted previously on this blog, both Korean and Japanese officials voiced optimistic comments after Suga Yoshihide became prime minister in September. Last month, he met with Park Jie-won, the head of the Korean National Intelligence Service, who emphasized the need for dialogue between Seoul and Tokyo. PM Suga later met with Korean members of the Korea-Japan Parliamentarians’ Union, who he asked to help “create a good environment” for the bilateral relationship. Although the comfort women agreement was not publicly mentioned, addressing this perennial dispute would be critical to reversing the downward trend in relations.

Amid all of this, the United States under President Donald Trump has not played an active role in mediating the disputes. “It’s like a full-time job getting involved between Japan and South Korea,” the president complained to reporters at the White House in July 2019. He emphasized his professional relationship with both President Moon and Prime Minister Abe, and added that “if they need me, I’m there.” More recently, U.S. Deputy Assistant

Secretary of State for Korea and Japan Marc Knapper said that his government was

“encouraged” by recent steps taken by Seoul and Tokyo to address their disputes. But the Trump administration has not taken a public and driving role mediating between them.

It is not clear if the incoming Biden administration will take a different approach to the disputes. Former Obama administration officials recall that Vice President Joe Biden did support efforts to bring President Park and Prime Minister Abe to the table. “What makes him unique is that he understands them from a policy standpoint but he also gets it as a politician,” one such official said, according to Daniel Sneider for Tokyo Business Today. “It is a political issue and it takes somebody at the leader level to understand the contours of this.”

Addressing the issue of the comfort women, along with the legacy of the Japanese Empire in Northeast Asia, is unlikely to be resolved easily. Despite their painful shared history, Korea and Japan increasingly face similar challenges that should be dealt with jointly. While the coronavirus pandemic and its economic repercussions are at the top of the list, it was only a year ago that Chinese and Russian planes violated airspace claimed by Korea and Japan. Leadership and empathy from both sides is sorely needed if both sides truly hope for a future-oriented relationship.

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